DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 478 392 SO 035 077

AUTHOR	Coughlin, Mimi
TITLE	Life History Influence on Teaching United States History.
PUB DATE	2003-04-00
NOTE	25p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (84th, Chicago, IL, April 21-25, 2003).
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Family History; *History Instruction; Interviews; *Life Events; Qualitative Research; *Secondary School Teachers; *United States History
IDENTIFIERS	Grounded Theory; Life History Method; Narrative Inquiry; Teacher Beliefs Study

ABSTRACT

A qualitative study explored the influences of life and family histories on high school teachers' beliefs about U.S. history. Drawing on data gathered through surveys and in-depth interviews, this paper argues that personal knowledge acts as a lens through which teachers see and project subject matter in U.S. history. Inquiring into life history influences on teachers' understandings and beliefs about history builds on an emergent strand of research about the influence of family history, race, gender, and nationality on students' understandings of history. The paper states that to explore the influences of family history and life experiences on teacher beliefs about U.S. history, the study drew on strategies used in grounded theory, life history, and narrative inquiry. It notes that 62 teachers from 33 Rhode Island schools returned completed surveys, and numerical analyses were used to identify emergent themes in the close-ended responses. The conclusion is that attention to the role personal knowledge plays in the construction of historical understandings and interpretations implies a rejection of attempts to depersonalize and standardize history teaching and learning and may point toward opportunities for meaningful and authentic engagement with the past in history classrooms. (Contains 55 references.) (BT)

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ED 478 392

Life History Influence on Teaching United States History

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SO 035 077

A paper presented at the annual meeting of the
American Educational Research Association

Chicago, IL. April 21-25, 2003

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This qualitative study explored the influences of life and family histories on high school teachers' beliefs about United States history. Drawing on data gathered through surveys and in-depth interviews, I argue that *personal knowledge* acts as a lens through which teachers see and project subject matter in United States history. The focus of this lens is not fixed and is continually influenced by family history, life experiences, idiosyncratic interests, and community and classroom contexts. Attention to life and family history as influences in the construction and representation of knowledge expands the notion of pedagogical content knowledge (Gudmundsdottir, 1990; Shulman, 1987; Wineburg & Wilson; 1991). Inquiring into life history influences on teachers' understandings and beliefs about history builds on an emergent strand of research on the influence of family history, race, gender, and nationality on students' understandings of history (Barton & Levstik, 1998; Epstein, 1998, 2000; Seixas, 1993; VanSledright, 1998).

Theoretical Framework

Shulman defines pedagogical content knowledge as "that special amalgam of content and pedagogy that is uniquely the province of teachers" (1987, p. 8). The idea that an understanding of the subject being taught and an understanding of instructional practices interact and combine provides a useful way to represent the complexity of teacher knowledge formed through daily efforts to engage students with subject matter. However, this definition assumes a level of clarity about the tools and trade of disciplinary scholarship that does not exist within history. The questions Shulman poses

about content knowledge: e.g., "What are the important ideas and skills in this domain? How are new ideas added and deficient ones dropped by those who produce knowledge in this area?" (Shulman 1987, p. 9) obscure the politically and culturally contested nature of subject matter in history (Foner, 1990; Novick, 1988). There are no ideologically free answers to unresolved questions endemic to the field like "what is history?" and "what is the purpose in teaching it?"

Conflict and contestation reverberate through debates about historical scholarship and history education that have taken place over the past three decades in the academy, school board meetings, and the popular press (Cornbleth & Waugh, 1999; Levine, 1996; Nash, Crabtree & Dunn, 1997). The passionate and personal quality of much of the debate reflects the extent to which individual and collective identities are at stake (Sobol, 1993; Cornbleth, 1995; Foner 1990). Intense political wrangling over history curricula reflects profound disagreement about which aspects and interpretations of the American past merit study and reflect the ideological nature of subject matter in United States history. The debate also reveals deep sources of anxiety and acrimony about contemporary American culture and competing aspirations for future generations.

Absent in all the sound and fury about what students don't know or should know about history is attention to the ongoing, daily ways in which history teachers define what counts as history in their own classrooms. There is little in the research literature on history education that illuminates the ideological convictions that teachers bring to the decisions they make about which aspects of history receive attention in their classrooms. While it is clear that history teachers' knowledge, experiences, and beliefs influence their curricular and instructional decisions (Evans, 1989; Romanowski, 1996; VanSledright,

1996; Wilson & Wineburg, 1988; Wineburg & Wilson, 1991), additional research is needed to more fully understand how teachers construct notions of historical significance in their particular United States history classrooms (Armento, 1986, Thorton, 1991). This study seeks to add to the literature by focusing on the influence of teachers' identities and ideologies on their construction of high school United States history.

Further inquiry into life and family history influences, which shape teachers' perceptions of the past and the curriculum they construct, can be informed by scholarship that has investigated student understandings of history. For example, Epstein (2000) found that students' racialized identities influenced their interpretations of the American experience. Epstein argues for a "sociocultural" approach to research on students' historical understanding that "augments cognitive studies by examining how factors such as race, ethnicity or nationality shape young people's perspectives on the past" (p. 191).

The idea that "ways of knowing" and ways of teaching are mediated by race, ethnicity, language, and gender has been explored by a number of scholars (Banks, 1998; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule 1986; Collins, 1993; Martínez Alemàn, 1999, Ropers-Huilman, 1998). Critical history, which reflects the critiques of feminist, African American, and ethnic studies scholars, embraces the postmodern view that any construction of the past is an act of "partial, subjective, and partisan history making" (Segall, 1999, p.359). A critical stance toward the construction of history knowledge shifts attention from "What is true?" to "what is truth, for whom, and why?" (Segall p. 369).

In this qualitative study I sought to understand how the socio-cultural positions that teachers occupy (and have historically occupied) and what they believe about

American political, economic, and social institutions shape their work as United States history teachers. The research question that drove this inquiry was "How do high school United States history teachers' life experiences influence their beliefs about teaching United States History?"

Methodology

To explore the influences of family history and life experiences on teachers' beliefs about United States history, I drew on strategies used in grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1994), life history (Creswell, 1998), and narrative inquiry (Casey, 1995).

Grounded theory (Creswell, 1998; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Patton, 1990,) provided a methodological framework for the collection and interpretation of data that suits the nature of this inquiry for several reasons. First grounded theory is complementary with phenomenological research questions. Second, grounded theory is a useful method to combine research tools like the close-ended survey questions with open-ended interviews that I employed in this study. Finally grounded theory is a process of testing emerging themes against systematically gathered data and existent theories. Thus the theoretical framework of the study is explicitly acknowledged as shaping the analytical conditions of the inquiry and strengthening themes that emerge from the data.

Life history and narrative approaches have been used by educational researchers to explore the meanings teachers make of their lives and their teaching (Carter, 1993; Casey, 1995; Connelly & Clandinin, 2000; Cole, 1994; Elbaz, 1990; Goodson, 1992; McEwan & Egan, 1995, Muchmore, 1999). Life history seeks to investigate cultural, social, institutional, and personal influences as they are reflected in an individual's telling

of the personally relevant past (Creswell, 1998; Muchmore, 1999). Narrative inquiry seeks rich and meaningful data that may be quite idiosyncratic because, as McEwan and Egan remind us, "a narrative... deals not just in facts, or ideas or theories, or even dreams, fears and hopes, but in facts, theories, and dreams from the perspective of someone's life, and in the context of someone's emotions" (1995, p. viii). Both approaches facilitated a focus on the personal and professional contexts in which teachers understand and represent the subject matter they teach.

Design of the Study

This study was designed to proceed in two stages of data collection; the first informed and overlapped with the second. In the first stage of data gathering, a written questionnaire was distributed to all high school United States History teachers in public, private and parochial schools in Rhode Island. The purpose of the survey was twofold. First, it elicited quantitative and qualitative data about teachers' life experiences and approaches to teaching United States history on which I began to ground my emerging theory. Second, the survey allowed me to identify a purposeful sample (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998) of participants for the next phase of data collection.

In the second stage of data collection, I conducted in-depth phenomenological interviews (Seidman, 1991) with a portion of the survey respondents to probe the categories from the initial analysis of the survey data and to add layers of life history context and narrative content to the study. Interviewees were encouraged to reflect on their experiences of learning history in school and on their life-long learning of history outside of school. Biographical and other influences that shaped teachers' approaches to the subject with the particular students they taught were elicited.

Site and Participant Selection

For two reasons Rhode Island provided an ideal setting to explore a range of teacher beliefs, attitudes and approaches to teaching United States in secondary schools that vary in type, size, location and the student and community populations they serve. First, within close geographic proximity, Rhode Island contains considerable diversity in terms of the population density, ethnicity, language(s), and the socio-economic profile of the communities in which schools reside or from which they draw their students (Rhode Island Department of Education, 2001). Secondly, educational policies in Rhode Island allow for curricular and instructional autonomy. There is no statewide program of "high stakes" testing or mandated history curriculum (Saxe, 1998). Course offerings, textbook adoptions and other curricular and instructional decisions are made at the building or classroom level.

Sixty-two teachers from 33 different schools returned completed surveys. Thus more than half (56%) of the 59 senior high schools in the state had at least one respondent, and 21% of the estimated 300 high school United States history teachers in the state responded. Twenty-two respondents expressed an interest in participating in the follow-up interviews. Ten interview participants were selected to provide a range of perspectives from as diverse a sample as possible.

Data Analysis

Numerical analyses were used to identify emergent themes in the close-ended responses. The open-ended survey responses and interview transcripts were coded using the "constant comparative method" to move between data and theory generation in an iterative and inductive process that is characteristic of grounded theory methodology

(Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1994, 1998). To retain context and continuity, I also analyzed the data holistically (Patton 1990). Using narrative techniques, I looked at all available data from each participant as a story that structures and communicates meaning when taken together (Mischler, 1986; Reissman, 1993).

Overview of Survey Findings

The first section of the survey asked respondents a series of close-ended questions about aspects of their life history that I theorized matter in their construction of United States history. These items included questions about gender, age, number of years teaching, race/ethnicity, first language, and personal and family experiences with the military and immigration. The data indicate that a majority of respondents are male (68%). Sixty-five percent of respondents were over the age of 40 with the modal response to the item regarding age being 51-60 (34%). Although most respondents (54%) had taught for less than 15 years, the modal response to the item regarding number of years teaching United States history was "over 20" (37%).

All of the respondents indicated that English is their first language and 94% of the respondents choose the category White as best describing their racial or ethnic identity. The remaining six percent choose not to answer the question or wrote in the response "human"; none of the respondents chose the categories Asia/Pacific Islander, Black, Hispanic, or Native American to identify himself or herself. The highest educational level attained by the parents of the respondents was evenly split between college and high school. Half of the respondents indicated that a parent or guardian attended or graduated from college or a post-secondary institution and half indicated that the formal education of their parent(s)/guardian(s) did not extend beyond high school.

All of the respondents hold college degrees. A little more than a quarter of the respondents majored in history (28%), another 28% majored in another social science discipline, and nearly half (45%) majored in education with a secondary social studies or history emphasis. Sixty-eight percent of respondents have an advanced degree. Most of the respondents (68%) went to high school in Rhode Island with a larger majority having attended college in the state (73%). Approximately one in five of the teachers (21%) who responded to the survey is teaching in the same high school he or she attended.

An overwhelming majority of respondents had a parent or guardian who served in the United States Armed Forces (71%). The respondents themselves were much less likely to have military experience, with 16% indicating that they had served in the United States Armed Forces.

Most (63%) of the respondents had a familial link to immigration within two generations. Three percent of the respondents indicated that they had immigrated to the United States, 5% had a parent or guardian who immigrated to the United States, and 55% had a grandparent who immigrated to the United States. Nearly all of the respondents who had a family history of immigration reported that their ancestors moved to the United States from Western Europe.

The survey also asked respondents to indicate content they believe is most important to teach and why it is important. The table below summarizes participants' rankings of various purposes for teaching United States history. The four stated purposes from which respondents could choose reflect purposes that have been historically attached to history education (Seixas, 1993).

Stated Purposes for Teaching United States History

Purposes for teaching United States History	Mean rank 1= highest 5= lowest	N=62	% ranked most important
Preparation for citizenship	2.35	24	39
College preparation	2.42	16	26
Development of general knowledge	2.82	6	10
Development of student interest	3.02	10	16

Respondents also had the opportunity to choose and specify other purposes as important reasons for teaching United States history. Write-in responses included: "pride in the United States; required for graduation; teach students how to be independent and lifelong learners; develop critical reasoning skills; develop cultural literacy and national identity; fun and enjoyment; development of general skills applicable to other courses and occupations; development of an appreciation/understanding of 'differences'".

These data indicate some of the reasons why teachers believe it is important to teach United States history. To understand what content they emphasize in their teaching to serve these purposes I asked respondents to prioritize teaching topics. Respondents chose their top three priorities from a list of ten topics that were adapted from themes outlined in the introduction to History of a Free Nation, which is a widely used high school United States history text (Bragdon, McCutchen, & Ritchie, 1998). The table below summarizes the respondents' content priorities for teaching United States history.

Subject Matter Priorities in United States History

Topic	% of respondents who chose topic as one of their top three priorities
American Democracy	66
U.S. Role in World Affairs	56
Civil Rights and Civil Liberties	52

Conflict and Cooperation	45
Geography and Environment	19
Cultural Diversity	13
Economic Development	10
Individual and Family	7
Influence of Technology	6
Humanities and Religion	3

The pattern of responses to this question demonstrates strong agreement among the respondents. More than half of the respondents chose *American Democracy* (66%), *U.S. Role in World Affairs* (56%), and *Civil Rights and Civil Liberties* (52%) as topics they believe to be the most important to teach. Six of the topics were chosen as a teaching priority by less than 20% of the teachers who completed the survey. The responses to this question were consistent with *preparation for citizenship* that was ranked the highest among the primary purpose for teaching United States history by these respondents.

While it is notable that an emphasis on teaching about American democracy for the purpose of preparing citizens emerged in this study, there remains considerable ambiguity about what these abstract terms mean to the participating teachers. Teachers' convictions about the American political, economic, and social systems, however, are embedded in teachers' description of what they teach and why they teach it. Subject matter in United States history is inherently ideological. Analysis of the responses elicited in the open-ended section of the survey and data gathered in the in-depth interviews help illustrate the sources and expressions of teachers' understandings of the core concepts that shape their pedagogical approach.

Emergent Themes

The close-ended survey items provide some indication of who is teaching United States history in Rhode Island and what topics they indicate are most important in their teaching. Attention to demographic details such as the gender, age, number of years teaching, language, race/ethnicity, and military and immigrant connections of the participants allowed me to ground my analysis in a sense of "relational exactness and concreteness in the world" (Martínez Alemán, 1999, p. 4) that highlights my interpretive stance that family and life history influences matter in the work of United States history teachers

The survey paints a picture, albeit with a broad brush, of a group of teachers who as a whole have close family ties to military service during World War II and to European immigration. These teachers emphasize knowledge about American democracy and preparation for citizenship as their teaching priorities. Teachers beliefs about the efficacy of "the system" and issues of access and equity in American society were probed in the in-depth interviews. Three themes emerged from an analysis of the open-ended responses and the interview data that indicate some of the ways in which who teachers say they are, what they believe to be important for students to learn, and how they describe their teaching are interrelated phenomena.

The first theme is that *personal knowledge* is an important source of information about history and about teaching on which teachers rely in constructing history curriculum and instruction. The second theme is that teachers' orientation to ideological subject matter in United States history is rooted in their personal knowledge. Finally, reflecting their sense that historical study is personally meaningful, the participants in this

study emphasized connections with the past and active investigation of historical sources as their teaching objectives.

Personal Knowledge

In describing the central role that an individual's interests and experiences play in the creation of knowledge, Michael Polanyi stated that "into every act of knowing there enters a passionate contribution of the person knowing what is being known, and that this coefficient is no mere imperfection but a vital component of his knowledge"(1958, p. viii). I am using Polanyi's term throughout this study to characterize the knowledge that participants described learning in intimate or idiosyncratic settings. I argue that this personal knowledge profoundly affects their understanding of United States history and their approach to teaching the subject.

In describing aspects of their life history that influence what they believe to be important to teach, the respondents to the survey most frequently cited being told about the military and immigrant experiences of older relatives. For many of the teachers in this study being the grandson or granddaughter of immigrants and the son or daughter of a war veteran is central to how they understand abstract and ideologically charged concepts like "American Democracy." Similarly their life experiences and family histories influence their choice and interpretation of "preparation for citizenship" as the most important purpose for teaching United States history.

Orientations to United States History

Many participants in this study placed their life history within a narrative about the American Dream and emphasized sacrifice, success, and pride in the ways their family achieved success through hard work. They also expressed gratitude and an

obligation to preserve a system that, in their opinion, works well. Patriotism was often linked to respect for the military service of family members. The following survey responses reflect the prevalence of these experiences and beliefs.

> As a child growing up in a military family, service to your country was highly important. I was taught that this nation gives us so much, we are obligated to give something in return- this includes being educated, voting, serving in the military and passing the importance of these things to the next generation and beyond.

Another teacher explained "With family 'Behind the Iron Curtain' until 1989 and grandparents who cherished their US Citizenship, I grew up realizing the importance of democracy, freedom of choice and diversity at an early age." An emphasis on teaching about American Democracy to prepare their students for citizenship flows, in part, from the participants understanding of their own family and life histories. Instructions about preserving the rights and responsibilities associated with having achieved the "American Dream" were often explicitly a part of the stories these teachers described being told by older relatives. Participants' convictions about ideological subject matter in United States history were often interwoven with their identities as children and grandchildren of veterans and immigrants.

Pedagogical Intentions

Because this study investigated how teachers talk about teaching and not how they actually teach I refer to their descriptions of teaching as *pedagogical intentions*. It is not my intention to assert that what they *say they do* in the classroom is different than *what they do* but to focus on teacher beliefs and constructions of meaning rather than on classroom activity. This is consistent with a narrative inquiry approach.

Teachers in this study emphasized two goals for their teaching. It is important to these teachers that students feel connected to the past and see its relationships to the present. They also seek to develop knowledge and skills that will foster their students' abilities to be active citizens in a democratic society. These pedagogical intentions reflect teachers' personal knowledge and their orientation to ideological subject matter in United States history curriculum.

Fostering students' affective connection to history was a theme that emerged as a central concern for the participants in this study. Across data sources teachers described materials they used as being "relevant" to students. One teacher described helping students connect with the personally relevant past as an aspect of his teaching that he is particularly proud. While stationed in Germany he researched and wrote a family history that traced his lineage back several generations. This experience was very meaningful to him and he uses it to guide students through the process of conducting research with their elder relatives. He describes the powerful learning that this family history assignment fosters.

> I have always had good feedback, not only from the students, mainly, but I have actually had parents, you know, months later say, "Boy, you know? Johnny, he went up in the attic, and he opened up the cedar chest…Probably the most gratifying comment was from a boy who actually did it on his father… Well, this boy said because of this paper his father finally talked to him about Vietnam.

Engagement with authentic history and a feeling of ownership of the inquiry were themes that echoed through teachers description of their pedagogical approaches far more often than references to any specific content knowledge that they wanted students to

master. These teachers demonstrated a preference for curriculum that provides conditions that draw on and develop students' personal knowledge.

Limitations of the Study and Directions for Further Inquiry

The design of the study rested on the assumption that teachers' family histories and life experiences are relevant to the content they teach. However, it should be noted that many aspects central to family history and life experience that I did not include in the close-ended survey may also have significant influence on teachers' orientation to United States history. For example, I did not ask respondents about their religious affiliation, marital status, or current family configurations. In the open-ended portion of the survey and in the interviews several participants did discuss their views of teaching as shaped in part by these aspects of their life experiences.

The demographic data point out clear limitations of this sample. None of the participants spoke a language beside English as their first language and none of the participants identified themselves as a person of color. The absence of these perspectives diminishes the richness of the data but is indicative of the homogeneity of the teaching population in general (Nieto, 2000).

Concluding Thoughts

In her study of images of America presented in elementary and secondary social studies/history classrooms, Cornbelth (1998) noted "teachers' provision of some America images rather than others . . . was shaped primarily by *personal experience and belief*.... [Teachers rarely acknowledged] peer or professional influence, societal changes, new knowledge, or the national America debate, related issues, or state curriculum discourse and policy activity" (p. 640, italics added). The participants in this study indicate that

their understandings and approaches to teaching United States history are guided by personal and family relevance. Personal knowledge appears to act as a compass that teachers use to navigate through a myriad of curricular and instructional choices.

It is important to acknowledge that while personal knowledge is a powerful source of information and inspiration for teachers it is also a *limited* source. For example, America as a land of boundless opportunity and a defender of freedom and equality at home and abroad is a powerful national narrative to which many of the teachers in this study described a deep familial connection. As a group the teachers in this study emphasized connections to an upwardly mobile trajectory that characterizes the experience of *some* immigrants. They also described beliefs about the value of military service that is shared by *some* veterans. Although it could be argued that triumphalist views about United States history reflect standard curricular fare (Loewen, 1995), this study suggests that personal sources of knowledge about history play a central role in how teachers understand and represent United States history. Dominant narratives are also personal narratives.

The limitations and even biases embedded in the particular interpretations and generalizations about historical experiences that influence their curriculum must be critically evaluated. Inquiring into the role teachers' life and family history play in shaping knowledge construction in high school United States history classrooms allows personal sources of knowledge to be fruitfully explored. This study raises several questions that could be explored by teachers wanting to reflect on their own practice and teacher educators seeking to investigate knowledge construction in history with pre-service teachers. Are teachers aware of the ways in which the personal lenses they use to

view United States history influences what they see and attempt to show to students? Would increased awareness allow teachers to survey a broader historical landscape? Can the notion of personal knowledge help educators understand and present alternative narratives that are rooted in different sources of personal knowledge?

Critical history, which reflects the feminist, African American, and ethnic studies critique of Eurocentric and androcentric bias in the history canon, offers an approach to investigating issues of representation and interpretation of the past. Interrogating history and history education critically requires consideration of the ideological and identity positions that are embedded in any telling of the past. This approach acknowledges that history does not tell itself and that attention must be paid to the teller as much as to the told (Segall, 1999).

Understanding subject matter teaching in general, and teaching history in particular, as an activity in which a teacher's sense of himself and his ideas about the world are embedded provides a site for examining what may be unexplored assumptions upon which teachers rely in their curricular and instructional decision making. It may be useful for history methods courses and professional development forums to focus attention on underlying structures that support or impede particular approaches to teaching history. Personal knowledge sources need to be critically examined by pre-service and in-service history teachers. New sources of knowledge outside of the family and life history experiences of teachers should be actively sought as part of the ongoing development of subject matter knowledge. Additionally, because personal knowledge influences curriculum and instruction in history, actively recruiting teachers with a diversity of family histories and life experiences would enrich history education.

Most of the energy brought to bear on K-12 history education in the past two decades has focused on attempts to standardize and account for students' knowledge of a national history (Bennett, 1992; Cheney, 1995; Gagnon & The Bradley Commission, 1989; Ravitch & Finn, 1987). Meanwhile teenagers' scores on standardized assessments have shown no upward movement (Carroll, 2002). History educators looking to engage young people in the study of the past must attend to the apathy and alienation that these assessments reveal as much as to the ignorance they seem designed to demonstrate. Formal history may be unpopular and ineffective (Carroll, 2002; Paxton, 1999) because it does little to draw on or cultivate personal knowledge.

Sadly in the rush to enumerate "what every American should know" (Hirsch, 1987) about United States history questions of why people might care about what they know were left unexplored. Attention to the role personal knowledge plays in the construction of historical understandings and interpretations implies a rejection of attempts to depersonalize and standardize history teaching and learning and may point towards opportunities for meaningful and authentic engagement with the past in history classrooms.

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